

SHORT STORIES

By James H C Fenton

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CYCADS

The early-morning rain was beating hard against the windows as Adrian settled down into the well-worn armchair. This room was still unfamiliar to him – the small diamond framed windows only letting in a gloomy light, a hint of dust everywhere, and shelf after shelf of books. Glancing down, he saw one small book off the shelf, lying on the floor, and clear of dust as though only recently fallen. Adrian raised himself from the chair, walked over and picked it up: it was old, leather-bound, and Victorian in appearance, with an impressed faded-gold title – *Cycads*. He returned to the chair and lazily flicked over the pages. It seemed a dry little tome, with many line drawings of palm-tree-like plants which, he assumed, were cycads. *Cycads* – was the first ‘C’ hard or soft? – the name had a slightly sinister ring. He put the book down on the shelf beside him, and then returned to his contemplation of the room: would he make any alterations, or would it be a sacrilege to move anything?

Later that day, on the train to London, Adrian was scanning the inside pages of *The Daily Telegraph* when, amongst the plethora of crime stories, a small news item caught his eye:

“International Cycad Conference: The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, are hosting a two-day conference where delegates from all over the world have come together to discuss the conservation of a primitive group of plants called cycads. Speaking first, Dr Ron Thornton, of the World Conservation Monitoring Centre, believed that cycads were now extinct, and this upsurge in interest in the group had come too late...”

At least, Adrian thought, at least he knew what a cycad looked like, which was probably more than most of the rest of the population. He turned on to the business pages, and checked the fortunes of his company: shares were down slightly, but no more than most of the

others in the current market. He stopped reading, and watched the endless suburbs, factory units and shopping centres go by in the rain without really seeing them. He had been looking forward for many months to this, his last day in work as an employee, but, now that it was upon him, he was unsure: he would certainly retain an interest in the company as a non-executive director but it would hardly be a full-time occupation. Still, he had his inheritance to enjoy.

There was a leaving party in the office that evening and Adrian had to put up with many hearty slaps on the back, and many 'lucky bastard's, and many glasses of champagne. So many, in fact, that he thought it wiser to decamp to a nearby hotel for the night. But although the meal was good and the wine was passable, Adrian hardly noticed – he was lost in a contemplative world of his own, floating unanchored in the aether. He was still in such a state later at the bar, and would have continued so all night, when his eye was caught by a girl: dark-suited, like himself, but in her this soberness seemed out of place owing to the vividness of her face. They stared at one another for a while. Then Adrian stood up, moved over, and sat down beside her; they started talking, easily and without introduction.

Adrian joined her at the breakfast table next morning. He found out that she, Sereena, was leaving London the next day, returning to Bhutan. She had, she said, been over for a conference which had just finished – a conference on cycads. Adrian stared at her.

'It was too late,' she said, 'the consensus was that cycads were indeed extinct.' She was also cross. Cycads, many aeons ago, had once dominated the world, and still had managed to survive, albeit at a more modest level, when they had become outdated, superceded by more advanced species. However, to survive for millions of years, and then become extinct purely at the hand of man was not fair. It was an irredeemable loss. 'Somebody ought to be shot for it,' she added.

She was, Adrian saw, gabbling a bit, but only because she was so emotionally involved.

‘Forgive me,’ Sereena said, ‘if I blast out a bit, but this conference has been dry and dusty, like an old book, and academic, and out there are whole galaxies of species becoming extinct. And what do most people care? Do you care?’

Adrian touched her hand, patronisingly patting it. ‘Of course I care.’

‘Then go on and prove it,’ she replied. ‘You and your type probably trample over species and people with gay abandon, and with not a thought for the long-term consequences of your actions. When did you last care about anything, least of all a plant or an animal?... Forgive me, I don’t even know you, and hear I am making all kinds of accusations.’

They sipped coffee silently, Adrian not quite sure how to react, and Sereena slightly embarrassed at her outburst. Soon after, Adrian stood up and, after a brief goodbye, left the table, the hotel and London. He was unsettled, though, and spent the whole journey back staring out of the train window. Once home, he went straight to the library and looked out *Cycads*, which was apparently written by one the Rev Algernon Thinthwaite. He did not find it very informative – many descriptions, mostly in Latin, and a list of countries where each species was found: Cabul, Hindoostan, Napaul, Bootan, Asam, Birma, Tibet, China... so many places, could they really be extinct now? On impulse he phoned the hotel.

‘Could I speak to Sereena..., Sereena..., I don’t know her second name. She is checking out tomorrow, for Bhutan, I think.’

‘One minute sir, we will see what we can do.’

Adrian heard whispering in the background, and then was informed that she was in Room 349, that she was currently out but, would sir, like to leave a message? Adrian gave his name and number, and asked her to call him.

Most of the rest of the evening Adrian spent restlessly pacing to and thro, hoping beyond hope that the phone would ring. And, of course, it did. His mother, asking him if he was settling down well, the chairman informing him of the date of the next board meeting, a

wrong number. But she was fated to phone in the end, and the call eventually came through.

‘Please forgive me for this morning...’,

‘Yes, yes, never mind that,’ Adrian interrupted, ‘I’ve been thinking, I want to come out to Bhutan with you.’

‘What?!’

‘Yes, I am certain that the cycad cannot yet be extinct, and I am going to look myself...’

‘How can you be certain?’

‘Never mind about that, I’m coming.’

It was not so simple to arrange, and it was a week later that Adrian found himself on a flight to India. He had briefed himself well: he had been to Kew, he had got copies of the papers given at the recent cycad conference, he had phoned experts around the world, and he had had the Latin descriptions translated. Indeed, Adrian felt himself to be as knowledgeable about cycads as any living person. However he was not quite sure of his plans when he got to Shiliguri, other than that he would be meeting Sereena there; she had talked vaguely about making arrangements with some trekking company.

The Indian sub-continent was not new to Adrian, he had stayed at the best hotels in Delhi, Hyderabad and Calcutta, but in these he had always been cocooned – shielded like a chrysalis from the outside world, neither moth nor caterpillar. He was now nervous, afraid of meeting India face to face with no protective shield, and was thus like putty in Sereena’s hand. He entered the trance-like state of the package-tour person and allowed himself to be organised.

‘We’ll start off by driving north to Okuthekh, and visit Dinga Sangh who runs the botanic gardens there. He, if anyone should know, will know where the last cycads were seen in this part of the Himalaya foothills.’

Sereena talked as she drove, proud to show off her knowledge, and proud, too, of the area – although she had no part in its making!

Bspectacled Dinga Sangh was the very picture of respectability, and his garden was well ordered too: all the plants neatly labelled, in rows and ranks, scientifically mocking the disordered pattern of nature. He was keen to talk. Cycads used to be abundant in the area, when he was a boy he could remember seeing them – five species no less. But there had been great pressure on the land, growing populations, and the trees had all been cut down. They were replanting now, of course, and there was a new hope in many villages of prosperity just around the corner. The new plantations were nearing maturity, and would provide firewood, would prevent soil erosion, would be saleable to the southern markets. But they were not the original forests: monocultures, mainly, of fast growing trees – and who would want to plant a cycad? Slow growing and of no value. What little natural forest there was left was being felled and converted to commercial, sustainable forest. Adrian, to whom forests were forests and trees were trees did not fully comprehend what Dinga Sangh was saying.

Adrian asked if we could be certain that cycads were extinct in the wild. Dinga replied that, although there had been strict laws to conserve them, who was there to enforce them? To his knowledge, there had been no confirmed sightings for three years. There had been a recent report of trees in Motthang, but it was a remote area, rarely visited by outsiders, and he doubted its veracity.

Later, Sereena told Adrian that she was sure this was their best lead and they would drive to Udaipur Taga, where the road ended, and trek to Motthang from there. It was the first time that Sereena had intimated that she would be fully joining him in his search, but he had no answer when she asked ‘without me, would you be one hundred per cent sure of recognising a cycad when you saw one?’

‘Well, er, no...’ She had never questioned his coming, perhaps finding no need to question the motives of someone who had the same interest as herself.

Sereena telephoned the trekking company, telling them to meet them at Udaipur Taga the next morning, with supplies and

equipment for two weeks. There was a guide and a porter both, as it turned out, from the Motthang area. Their packs, all four of them, were heavy as they trudged up the path into the foothills; so heavy, in fact, that Adrian had little inclination to look around – only enough to note that there were plenty of trees about. Sereena explained that this was all secondary forest, either planted or naturally regenerated, but Adrian had not got spare energy enough to discuss with her what she meant, or why cycads could not grow here. He did think that he recognised a rhododendron, though.

They were three days on that path; three days of sheer drudgery. There was not much conversation at night in the huts, for the guides had little English and Adrian was generally too tired to talk, and Sereena appeared withdrawn. On the fourth day they reached Motthang. Sereena negotiated the use of a hut, where they unpacked all their kit, and Adrian lay thankfully down on the bedding. Sereena went out to talk to the local people, and came back about half an hour later in a highly agitated state.

‘Everyone knows we are here to look for cycads, but they all appear glum and hostile and nobody I have spoken to admits of ever having seen one; and, what I find disturbing is that our guides have totally disappeared. Nobody knows where they are.’

Adrian was unconcerned, pointing out that the locals were probably as ignorant about cycads as he was two weeks ago and, in any case, they would not be needing their guides for a few days while they reconnoitred the area. Even if the guides never returned, they could always walk back.

They set out and climbed to a vantage point where they could survey the whole valley, identifying wooded areas and Sereena judging their ecological suitability. After this they traipsed from wood to wood for two long days without success. However, on the afternoon of the third day, while approaching one forested area they had not yet visited, they heard chainsaws in the distance, and could see large clearings full of fallen trees.

‘It would be just my luck if I witnessed the felling of the last cycad on earth,’ mused Adrian.

Suddenly Sereena grasped Adrian’s hand and shouted excitedly: ‘Look, look, over there – a cycad, I’m sure it is.’

They approached at a run a small clump of trees and, just as they did so, the chainsaws went silent and a man came out, shouting at them. Sereena told Adrian that he was shouting ‘Keep away!’

‘Ask him why’, said Adrian.

After a heated conversation, Sereena informed Adrian that the man was saying that these trees had to be felled to make way for more productive forest.

‘But tell him that these are cycads, probably the last left on earth. Tell him that they are fully protected by law.’

When Sereena had translated, the man spat on the ground and pushed them away, shouting, in English, ‘you have progress, we have progress!’

‘Make him understand,’ pleaded Adrian, ‘Please, make him understand. Tell him we will go and fetch the police.’

Sereena tried once more arguing with him, but the man got violent, picked up a stick and started swiping at them. Another man appeared on the scene, and then another.

Sereena said urgently, ‘we’d better go, quick, we’d better go.’

She took Adrian’s hand, and pulled him back down the hill. As they turned to go, two shots rang out and they slumped to the ground. The men went back into the trees and the chainsaws again started up.

DAS LIED VERLOREN

‘Mmmm... yes... after the first one, let’s say there’s a choice of, what would you suggest?’

‘Ten.’

‘Ten, then; after this how many different beats could you have?’

‘Oh, any number, but let’s say, um... 6.’

‘Right, that’s 10 times 6, 60. Then, how many notes would the average have? 20? 30? 50?’

‘Well... try 30 at first.’

‘Okay... Uh uh! My calculator has run out after four, and that gives us, let’s see... yes, that’s it, nearly 800 million! So, after five that, that would rise to, er..., 48 billion! You see, Reichman, there’s absolutely no chance that we will ever run out. There’s more possibilities than atoms in the universe!’

‘But Fergus, we don’t know how many good ones, how many immortal ones there are amongst this lot. Take the stars, for instance. Are there 48 billion? I don’t know. But of them all, there is only one that for certain supports life. Others might, or might not, there’s no way of knowing. Maybe it’s the same with music? Maybe of the 48 billion only a handful are immortal.’

‘Well we certainly know there’s many more than one. In fact, how many are there, do you think, Reichman?’

‘Difficult to say, but my fear is that all the good ones have already been taken.’

‘You mean to say that since humans have been around, all the 48 billion or more have been tried, and all the good ones extracted? Come on!’

‘I suppose not. But look at this century, Fergus. There have been few good or immortal themes, at least in the second half. Is it the inspiration that has dried up, or, what I fear, that all the good ones have already been taken?’

‘What nonsense! You have been looking in the wrong place. Certainly classical composers turned away from tonality, but in popular culture there are numerous tunes that will last.’

‘How can you be so sure, Fergus? Do we not like the tunes we are familiar with, whatever their quality or their ability to outlast us, and that the next generation will discard them?’

‘Exactly, but some are filtered out from every age to become immortal, outlasting the generation in which they are created. The best folk songs, for example, have built up over the centuries. The Londonderry Air, for instance.’

‘Are they still building up?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Such as?’

‘Well... what about Streets of London, Dirty Old Town, and... yes, Annie’s Song?’

‘I only know the last.’

‘That’s because you were brought up in Germany, dear Reichman, but give them time: and, of course the popular songs of the twentieth century are to all intents and purposes folk music, from Victorian ballads, through the songs of the 30s, to modern rock music. And many of these tunes will survive.’

‘How many, would you think?’

‘Quite a lot, I’d say. Think of all the Beatles songs, of tunes from the musicals, and even some modern rock songs.’

‘Such as?’

‘Such as, let me think... Waterloo Sunset..’

‘Waterloo Sunset?’

‘And You’re So Vain, and, and Layla...’

‘I’ve never heard any of these...’

‘They’re all 1970s pop... ‘

‘Which proves my point exactly, Fergus. You are familiar with these, you were brought up with them, but they’re not going to be immortal tunes, they’re...’

‘How can you be so sure? They were early works as the genre developed, and what’s fascinating is that, when a new genre of music is created, generally through new technology, whether the 17th century chamber orchestra, the large 18th century orchestra, the 19th century piano, or even the electric guitar, then composers are very quick to exploit it to the full; take Chopin and Liszt, for example, with the modern piano, or Eric Clapton and Jimmi Hendrix with the electric guitar. Subsequently the quality of music written dies away, and seems unable to surpass the early pioneers...’

‘Thank you for this encouraging analysis! How am I to write my symphony when you say that the form is past its sell-by date, past its peak? This only confirms my fear, that all the good symphonic themes have been used up... Anyhow I must go now, Fergus. It is only a month till the opening of the hall, and I am not even half way through the work...’

‘Where have you got to?’

‘Well, I have this superb static ground bass, which runs throughout the work; all, and I say all, all I need now is the theme to go over the top.’

‘You’ve not been plagiarising Gorecki again? You can’t escape the *zeitgeist*, Reichman.’

‘Oh do shut up... Anyway, see you tomorrow.’

* * *

That evening Reichman was sitting at the piano, but inspiration appeared to be at bay. He listlessly played what he saw as the backdrop to the work, the work that would be his breakthrough, but his mind wandered. The conductor tapped for silence. The orchestra picked up their instruments. The conductor, no less than Andeson himself, lifted up his arms, and they were off. The strings started what would be their eternal monotone, the brass shimmered in and out of focus, the woodwind began their mournful refrain, and the kettle drums opened with their half-heard beat. This was received

well, the hall was quiet, with Reichman himself in the front row. However, after five or so minutes of this Reichman could begin to pick up restless shufflings, almost inaudible at first, but, in Reichman's mind building up so that soon they were louder than the music itself. He tried to imagine the first signs of the theme emerging from the background, growing, evolving, finally breaking out about two-thirds of the way through, before once more being subsumed. And the audience were ecstatic, Reichman appeared on stage, and bowed, and bowed, flowers were brought; and then with a jolt he realised that they were booing, and he was scuttling out of the hall, the theme never having had the courage to emerge. Reichman slammed the piano lid down.

* * *

'It's no good, Fergus, it's no good. I have the idea, but not the inspiration. I don't like to do it, but I'll have to tell Anderson to change the programme.'

'Oh you can't do that, you mustn't,' butted in Fiona. 'This is your chance. Remember how you pulled that Adagio out of the hat for your final exam?'

'Yes Fiona, but I am not in charge of inspiration.'

'Who is, then?' put in Fergus 'If not the composer... You don't honestly believe that God...'

'No, of course not...'

'Then there will be a tune somewhere, waiting to be pulled out of the aether,' said Fergus.

'Unless of course they are all used up!'

'Lets not go over that ground again.'

'Why Reichman do you need a main tune at all?' asked Fiona, 'Surely there's more to music than just a good tune?'

'That's just where you are wrong. If music, pure music is not about tunes, about a pleasing arrangement of notes, it is about nothing. Certainly when an accompaniment to an activity, such as

dancing, or going to war, then rhythm can have priority, and the notes are less important. But for pure music...'

'I've got it, Reichman,' interjected Fergus, 'inspiration pulled out of the aether!'

'What?'

'Fiona, your family have a cottage on that island you are always going to?'

'Yes.'

'Well, it's perfect, just perfect don't you see? How long is it before the concert, Reichman?'

'About four weeks, but I told Andeson I would send him the manuscript at least a week before then.'

'Well then, say three weeks. Why not go to Fiona's island for a week or so, away from all distractions, and I'm sure then that inspiration will come. What do you say Fiona, there'd be no problem with this?'

'No, I don't think so... Indeed, I think it would be an excellent idea, and there is a piano. In fact I could go as well, to show you the ropes, Reichman, to turn on the water, to...'

'Mmmm...' paused Reichman. 'It might be worth a try, but there is no need for you to come, Fiona...'

* * *

It was not quite sure whether to be sleet or snow over Rannoch Moor. The snow or sleet was swirling in the headlights, the road looked slippery; suddenly a mountain hare ran across in front of them, the car swerved.

'Watch out!'

'It's alright, Fiona.'

'Be careful, we almost...'

'But we didn't.'

Moving down off the moor, the snow or sleet turned to sleet or rain, and became heavy, and it was a tiresome journey all the way to

the bed and breakfast. The ferry crossing was choppy, but not too rough, the clouds were down, the sea was grey, and a heavy, persistent drizzle was falling, so that little but the immediate horizon could be seen. The cottage felt damp and uninviting, at least until it warmed up, which was about on the third day. The wind rarely dropped below gale force, and there was little incentive to go out.

‘The roar of the wind distracts me,’ complained Fergus on many occasions, ‘and the piano is out of tune, and the notes stick.’

‘The wind sounds like your background monotone to me.’

‘Well let’s hope that the theme emerges soon!’

Fiona looked forward to the evenings, when a fire could be lit, adding warmth to the room, and the elements outside could be ignored. At least, on the first night. For on subsequent nights, just at the time when Fergus was relaxing, and beginning to feel positive, there was the dreaded knock on the door, and Hector would come in with his whisky bottle, and would not leave until it, and any other bottle in the house was empty.

‘It’s a common problem on the west coast’, explained Fiona, ‘especially with middle-aged men who never married.’

‘I’m beginning to wish I never came. Valuable time is passing by, and though there is plenty coming out of the ether, it’s not much help to me!’

‘A joke, Reichman,’ laughed Fiona, ‘I don’t believe it!’

In the event, they went home a day early.

* * *

After an evening of despair, Reichman finally put pen to paper. Dear Andeson, It is with deep regret that I feel unable to present to you my new symphony... He tried to phone Fiona, but she was out, as was Fergus. He tried the piano, the television, the whisky, but in the end he went to bed, and was eventually lulled to sleep by some Schubert *lieder* he had found after ransacking the airwaves.

He awoke to sun streaming in the window, and immediately scabbled to find the Anderson letter and ripped it into many tiny pieces. He was only five minutes at the piano. He phoned and woke Fiona, and she was in, and he phoned and woke Fergus, and he was in.

* * *

‘It’s just perfect, just perfect; and the ground bass complements it beautifully. I’ve discovered one thing, though – it’s almost too perfect.’

‘How do mean?’ asked Fiona.

‘Well, it would appear that the perfect theme, the perfect tune is just that: it is complete in itself.’

‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘It cannot be developed, and you cannot hang a whole symphony on one tune. If it’s perfect, it’s complete in... If you start developing it, people say, “no, that sounds wrong, the tune goes this way”.’

‘You mean to say, Reichman, ‘ put in Fergus, ‘that now you have found your tune, you are not happy with it? I find that hard...’

‘In a way, yes. I’m sure I can lead up to it, and then depart from it slowly, but I cannot play around with the tune itself.’

‘But hang on,’ said Fergus, ‘what about all the “themes and variations” written? Other composers seem able to string out a good tune.’

‘Well, no: the point is that the theme, and I’ve thinking about this today, the theme in these cases is not one of the great, immortal tunes we having been talking about lately. The tunes chosen by the composer are those capable of development, and often it is one of the variations that is the great tune itself. Take Nimrod in the Enigma Variations, or Rachmaninoff’s 18th Paganini variation. Take the opening sequence of Beethoven’s Fifth symphony: da da da dar, da da da dar. This can hardly be considered a great tune, but, because of this Beethoven managed to do a lot with it.’

‘So you are suggesting’, said Fiona ‘that composers should not be looking for the big tune?’

‘Perhaps he is suggesting,’ interrupted Fergus, ‘that most of what composers write is merely padding, the backing if you like, to the big tune; or most of the time they are just lacking inspiration, as has been the case with you, my dear Reichman, these past few days. In fact, how many big tunes does the average composer come up with in a lifetime?’

‘There may be some truth in what you are saying. How many big tunes in a composer’s lifetime? Let’s think. How many of Mozart’s tunes are truly memorable? or Beethoven’s? or Chopin’s? or...’

‘I would say about ten,’ put in Fiona.

‘Yes I would agree with Fiona here, Reichman. It sounds about right, maybe even less. There are some composers who are remembered for just one piece. Their output may or may not have been high, but they only struck the jackpot once.’

‘Which is all you need to be immortal,’ said Fiona. ‘As a composer, Reichman, are you trying only ever to produce masterpieces, or would you release some pieces that you know are merely padding, good padding maybe, but padding nevertheless?’

‘The problem, Fiona,’ Reichman answered, ‘is that you cannot always tell. Only time can filter the wheat from the chaff. I’m sure Haydn and Mozart churned out lots of symphonies just to meet deadlines, or to raise money. Indeed, I believe you can now programme computers to write symphonies in their styles. But whether you apply it to a given work, or to a lifetime’s work, if you only published the good tunes, your output would be a bit thin!’

‘As was Sibelius’s in the last 30 year’s of his life.’ pointed out Fergus. ‘Output nil! And, although his lifetime output may not have been particularly high compared to some others, he certainly had his hits. Finlandia, the Karelia Suite, the Valse Triste...’

‘And, of course,’ interrupted Reichman ‘the tunes in his Fifth symphony, and the Seventh. If I had been him, I also would have given up after writing his Seventh: what a theme, and, you note, he

does not develop it at all – just repeats it three times. And the last movement of his Fifth: the only piece I know where two great tunes are played simultaneously, although at the very end when he tries to develop the lower theme it does go to pieces a bit.’

‘You know,’ said Fergus, ‘what we are saying applies across the whole spectrum of music. The average album, for example, has say, ten tracks, but most tracks are merely there to support the big song; and most of the best songs and albums, the all-time greats, occur early in a group’s life. It’s the same with musicals: the number of good tunes reduces in a composer’s later musicals.’

‘Is this lack of inspiration? Or an increasing lack of motivation, perhaps even laziness?’

‘Maybe they are related?’

‘Andrew Lloyd Weber,’ put in Fiona, ‘is a fine example. Jesus Christ Superstar had many fine tunes. But most of his current musicals are padding for the one big tune!’

‘At least he is still coming up with the occasional good tune, so there is still hope for you, Reichman,’ said Fergus. ‘How many of your ten have pulled out of the aether?’

* * *

The concert hall was packed. Reichman, Fiona and Fergus were in the front row, right below Mr Andeson himself. Reichman liked to think that the hall was full because of him, rather than because of the inclusion of a popular piano concerto. He was glad his piece was the first, and would not have to follow a known masterpiece.

The conductor tapped for silence. The orchestra picked up their instruments. The conductor lifted up his arms, and they were off. The strings started what would be their eternal monotone, the brass shimmered in and out of focus, the woodwind began their mournful refrain, and the kettle drums opened with their half-heard beat. After five or so minutes there were the first signs of a different tonality emerging from the background, growing, evolving, until finally the

main theme broke out about two-thirds of the way through, before once more being subsumed. And the audience were ecstatic, Reichman appeared on stage, and bowed, and bowed, flowers were brought, and he returned to his seat and Fiona hugged him.

Next morning Reichman bought all the papers he could find, avidly searched for the reviews, and saw that he was universally acclaimed. Fiona shouted across the room, ‘Hey, look at this one.’

“The performance of Reichman’s first symphony received a standing ovation at the inaugural concert of the new hall. With this work, the symphonic form appears finally to have re-emerged after its eclipse earlier this century. The Scottish influence is apparent, with a drone-like bass overlain by the almost pentatonic main theme. My one criticism is that this theme does possess a strong similarity to Schubert’s little known song *Das Lied Verloren...*”

MODERN MAN

Kath waved goodbye to Niall.

‘See you about 6 o’clock. Bye, then’.

‘Bye.’ Niall closed the door and walked back to the breakfast table.

‘Can you get the jam down, please daddy?’ shouted Calum.

‘Haven’t you finished yet? Quick, or we’ll be late for school’.

He got the jam out of the cupboard, and then shoved a few spoonfuls of muesli down Robert’s mouth. Calum finished up his jam sandwich, got down from the table, and ran upstairs.

Five minutes later the front door of the villa slammed shut behind them as they walked down the cypress-lined drive, turning right into Clifton Avenue. Niall was pushing Robert along in the buggy, while Calum held his hand and chatted. He was remembering that they were meant to take to school that day some yoghurt pots and string.

‘What for?’ asked Niall.

‘I can’t remember, can we go back for them?’

Niall glanced at his watch. ‘There’s no time now, and we’ll be late as it is.’ They hurried on, reaching the school just as the bell sounded. Calum ran in without a backward glance, and Niall turned to go home.

‘Good morning Niall’, said Heather Campbell.

‘Good morning’.

‘Morning Niall,’ said Angela O’Donnell, and various other mums. He murmured pleasant ‘good mornings’ in return, and hurried on.

‘It’s really impressive the way he looks after the kids’, said Angela.

‘Yes, I wish mine would’, agreed Heather, and they too turned their buggies round and returned, gossiping, down the avenue.

Niall tidied up in the kitchen, settled Robert down for a nap, and then went out to mow the lawn. Kath returned about half past six.

‘Had a good day?’ asked Niall.

‘Fine thanks, and you?’

‘Not bad. I mowed the lawn, went to the shops, and potted about a bit. Fancy a drink?’

‘Yes, I could do with one. Is Calum still awake and what about Robert?’

‘Calum’s waiting to see you, and Robert’s asleep at present, but I think he might wake up any time now’. She went quietly upstairs.

When she came down again, Niall gave her the drink and they both sat down on the sofa. Kath turned on the local news.

‘Oh no, they are still covering that dreadful bomb blast in England. The media do go overboard with these things, and it was almost a week ago now.’ She changed channels, while Niall got up and went into the kitchen. After a few minutes he came back with two platefuls of spaghetti bolognaise, which they both ate silently while watching telly.

‘Don’t forget its my club night, tonight.’

‘Oh, I had’, answered Kath. ‘What time will you be going out?’

‘About eight o’clock’.

‘I hope the children aren’t a problem, then. I’ve got to spend time tonight reading my notes in time for the meeting in Larne.’

‘What meeting?’

‘Oh, you know. The one about the possible takeover of my company.’

‘If you are taken over, might you lose your job?’

‘It’s a possibility, but remote.’

Niall set off to his club about 8 o’clock. Kath knew, and Niall knew that Kath knew, that his social club was really no more than a bar where he went once a week to drink. Kath accepted this, for she saw it as a chance for him to meet up with his friends and let off a bit of steam after being cooped up in the house all day. She remembered

how, before Niall lost his job, and she was home all day, she sometimes wanted to scream at the end of a long day, and wished she could have gone out to ‘a club’. However, Niall was good the way he had accepted being at home these last three years, and Kath was pleased that he was a thoroughly modern man.

Niall normally returned from the club about eleven o’clock, and Kath was mildly surprised that he rarely came back roaring drunk, just slightly inebriated. This night, however, he did not get in until well after midnight, and appeared not to have drunk at all. Kath, who was in bed, lazily quizzed him on this, but he just replied that he hadn’t felt like it.

‘Have the children given you any trouble?’ he asked.

‘No, they’ve been fine.’

‘Robert’ll be happy, he’s going round to play at the Campbells tomorrow morning.’

‘Is he?’ Kath replied uninterestedly, and promptly fell asleep.

Next day Kath got home about seven thirty but, as she drove up the drive, she was surprised to see no lights on in the house. She rushed up to the door and let herself in, but the house appeared empty. There was a knock at the door. It was Heather Campbell with Calum and Robert.

‘W-why, why have you got the children. Where’s Niall?’

‘He didn’t pick me up at school’, shouted Robert. ‘I’ve been playing all day with John and Matthew. It’s been great, first we...’

‘Quiet,’ said Kath. ‘Heather, what’s going on? Have you seen Niall at all today?’

‘Well, yes. After dropping off Calum, he walked back with me because he was leaving Robert to play with us this morning. He left about quarter past nine. When he did not turn up at lunchtime as planned, I walked across to you, but your house was empty.’

‘Did you ask around? Were you worried?’

‘Not particularly, it happened once before, remember, about two years ago when he got delayed coming back from Belfast. He said he was going to town today.’

‘To town? He never said anything about that to me!’

‘Which is why he dropped round Robert, so I just assumed he was delayed again. I was a little concerned when there was still no sign of him at six o’clock, but the children were so happy playing that I just left them to get on with it.’

Three days later Niall was back. He just walked in one afternoon. Kath’s mum opened the door to him.

‘Niall’.

‘I’m back’.

‘But, but... Where have you... Did the police find you?’

‘The police?’

‘Yes, you are a “missing person”.’

‘Have they been looking?’

‘Yes, but they weren’t too interested. Apparently men walk out on their families all the time. With the recent upsurge in terrorism, they say they have more important people, terrorists, that is, to find. But, where have you been. Kath is worried silly and...’

‘Is Kath here now?’

‘No, she went back to work yesterday when I arrived. Does she know... You’d better phone. She’s really worried that having to take the two days off without notice may have put her job at risk.’

‘Good, I mean... Where’s Robert?’

‘Upstairs asleep. Goodness, look at the time. I, we, must get Calum from school.’

‘What did you tell Calum?’

‘About what?’

‘About me being away.’

‘We said you had to go suddenly to visit your sick uncle in Cork. We’ve been telling all the neighbours that.’

‘Its lucky I do have a sick uncle’, mused Niall.

‘But Niall, where have you been? You can’t just walk out on your family for three days without saying anything.’ But Niall would say nothing more, other than say he had had to go ‘walkabout’.

‘Walkabout?’ asked Kath’s mother.

‘Yes, walkabout. Like the aborigines. I needed space. But I will come with you to collect Calum. No, better still, you stay behind and look after Robert, and I’ll fetch Calum.’

Calum was delighted to see his dad again. ‘Is he better? You’ll never guess what gran and I did yesterday – we had ice-creams each, and then... And a policeman came round to the house the night you went. Mum wouldn’t say what he wanted. What did he want?’

‘I don’t know. I wasn’t there, remember, silly.’

‘Oh no, nor you were. And tomorrow...’

Calum chatted on.

Niall phoned Kath at work when they arrived home, but she had already left for home. Thus Niall’s return caught her completely by surprise.

‘Niall. I was so worried’, and she flung her arms round him. ‘I thought... I feared the worst. I thought you must have been kidnapped.’

‘Kidnapped? Who by?’

‘I don’t know. You have nothing to hide, and we don’t have that much money. But you know you always think the worst in these situations.’

They embraced for a while longer, then Niall slowly pulled himself away.

‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry. But sometimes it all gets a bit much. This being at home all the time. Men aren’t built this way. I must have space. I have not been anywhere in particular, just round and about.’

‘Well. Let me know next time you are planning something like this again. It’s not fair. It’s not fair on me, not knowing, worrying...’

And that was the end of it. Neither Kath nor her mother could get any more out of Niall. There was one major consequence, though. Kath lost her job. In the forthcoming takeover, the company decided that Kath had shown unreliability owing to her family commitments which counted against her staying on the new merged company.

Thursdays they met. In the backroom of the Old Ship. They bought some drinks for the sake of form, for they were, after all, the Clifton Avenue Social Club. But drinking was not the reason they foregathered. They brought maps and plans, and pored over them for hours (the designs of the new social club building, they said, and sometimes they were). They were quiet and earnest. Sober men in sober clothing. Some weeks one or more of them would not be there (family problems, they said). On these days the meeting was quieter than usual, but the television was turned up and news broadcasts were listened to avidly.

Farrell rarely missed a meeting. He had little to say himself. He gave little, and received little. Until one meeting when The Leader spent a long time talking to him. He was given a brown package, which he immediately concealed about his person, and also an envelope – for expenses, he was told.

The next day Farrell put this package at the bottom of his lunch box, hidden under two rounds of cheese and tomato sandwich. This he put in his briefcase, together with a few papers (dealing with a takeover deal), and a copy of the *Belfast Telegraph*. He took the train south. Sitting in the carriage, looking at the other passengers, Farrell surmised about their humdrum existence – journeys to work, meetings, school runs, washing up, mowing the lawn, a villa in cypressville. In a way he pitied them. He was above all this. He had secret knowledge and power: he had more power over them than

they ever would realise, and he could use it anytime, poor fools them. He felt excited. This is living!

He was still in this almost trance-like state on the ferry over. He watched the mass of humanity board the boat, he watched them putting their bags in the luggage rack, queue in the cafeteria or promenade on deck, buy their tickets from the purser, queue on the stairs down to the car deck, and he watched them drive off in an orderly line under the gantries, and away. Meanwhile he, one of the last to leave the ship, sauntered carelessly to the waiting train and, sitting in his first class compartment, contemplated his escape from the humdrum.

Arriving in London he mixed with the crowds, or rather, in his minds eye, he did not mix but floated above them. He took an open-top bus round the centre, noting the geography of the place, and then booked into a Thistle Hotel. The next day he joined in the polyglot throng viewing the sites, the Tower of London, the Crown Jewels, Westminster Abbey, Tower Bridge... Below Tower Bridge he sat down on the bench for lunch, watching the muddy Thames flow past *HMS Belfast*. When he got up, he appeared to forget to pack his lunch box in his briefcase, and it was still sitting under the bench half an hour later when the northern approaches to the bridge was destroyed.

There was a knock on the door of number six Clifton Avenue. Kath opened it to see three uniformed constabulary officers standing on the doorstep. It was her first day at home after losing her job. Calum was also at home, off school with a temperature.

‘Can I help you? Niall’s been back for well over a week now.’ Kath stated, remembering that she hadn’t informed the police of Niall’s return.

But there was no response from the constabulary who immediately had a foot in the door, and rushed the corridor. They encountered Niall doing the washing up in the sink.

‘Are you Niall Jameson?’ an officer shouted.

‘I am’.

‘Where are you going, dad?’ Calum asked, as Niall was led away. Kath just stared.

OBSESSIONS

The little toy train of two carriages drew into the terminus of Kyle of Lochalsh at the same time as Melanie MacDonald and her mother arrived in their car. They hardly noticed the familiar salt-laden smirr coming out of the southwest as they took Melanie's bags out of the boot and walked the short steps to the station.

'A single to Cambridge, please,' requested Melanie.

'Have you a student rail card?' asked the station official.

'No, Murdo, I haven't.'

'Well, Melanie, at the price of the ticket it's probably worth your while.'

'Okay then, how much is it?'

After buying her ticket, she rejoined her mother on the platform, exclaiming, 'that's taken up most of my scholarship money!'

'Are you sure you'll have enough to live on?'

'Yes, mum, don't worry about me.'

Melanie put her bags on the train, after which they both stood on the platform talking desultorily until the guard indicated that the train was about to leave. They hugged tightly.

'You're a credit to Portree High School. Take care!'

'Yes, mum.'

It was over twelve hours later, and getting dark, that Melanie found herself almost alone on a damp, windswept platform. She carried her heavy bags to the station entrance, uncertain whether to find a bus, take a taxi, or walk to her college lodgings. She was wearily trying to make sense of a bus timetable on the wall when a short, stocky, dark-haired man came up to her.

'Hi,' he said, 'you must be in the same ship as me?'

'Ship?'

'We are both in the same way – new to Cambridge and trying to get to our colleges, yes?'

‘Oh, boat!’ laughed Melanie. ‘Yes, I’m trying to decide how to get to my college.’

‘Why not share a taxi? My name is Abdul, and this is my first time in Cambridge.’

‘Hi, I’m Melanie. Yes, why not. I’ve been travelling over twelve hours, and I just want to arrive.’

‘You’ve been travelling twelve hours? Are from America?’

‘No, only Scotland! It just takes a long time to get here!’

‘Twelve hours is a long time – less than five hours ago I was back home in Syria! Where is Scotland?’

‘You mean you don’t know?’

As is often the case when starting a new phase of your life, there is an element of randomness in whom you first meet, but these initial acquaintances are often the foundation of a long-lasting friendliness. And so it was with Melanie and Abdul; by chance they were both studying the same subjects, economics and political philosophy, and oftentimes met at lectures and tutorials. It was thus inevitable that they saw much of each other, and they held long debates in each others’ rooms.

‘Yes, Abdul, my ancestors had a hard time, often, it would appear, being on their own land only under the sufferance of the landlord,’ Melanie was saying. ‘Even today, landlords can come in at random, only needing to be rich to buy the land, and then they try to tell the crofters what to do – the crofters being people, I mean to say, who have occupied the land from time immemorial!’

‘It is the same in my Syria,’ riposted Abdul. ‘The Israelis have taken the Golan Heights from us, even though it has been in our care for generations.’

So it was that the following summer, during the long vacation, Melanie found herself invited to stay with Abdul’s uncle, Sheik Abraham Mudallah, at his residence near Jezzine in the Lebanon.

The Sheik himself was there to meet them at the airport, a tall, dark-haired, handsome man in his late thirties or early forties.

‘Welcome to Lebanon, Melanie,’ he said in his close-cropped English accent. ‘Abdul never said you were so beautiful, and your blond hair shows the blood of the Vikings, yes?’

Melanie blushed. ‘Yes, it’s possible that there’s some Viking blood mixed up amongst us Celts.’

‘Celts?’ replied the sheik, ‘fiery, Irish blood?’

‘Not much fire in us Scottish Celts, I’m afraid, we’ve been downtrodden for so many centuries.’

‘I understand. By the English, yes?’

‘That’s not quite true,’ Melanie began, but stopped when she realised he was no longer listening. ‘Come on Abdul,’ he was saying, ‘take Melanie’s bags to the car.’

The sheik drove them away in a khaki-coloured Range Rover, its windows tinted against the glare of the sun. During the journey the heat of the desert was kept at bay by the air-conditioning, but they encountered it again with a shock as they disgorged into the dusty courtyard of the sheik’s residence, itself a shambling array of low buildings set high on a dry hillside. Sheik Abraham led them through many passages and archways, arriving at last in a large, light-filled, airy room. The room was open on one side to a small cloister with a cluster of chairs on the grass under the shade of a single palm tree. On the other, through verandah windows, there was a grand vista westward over a bright green lawn that seemed to hang in the air, the Mediterranean Sea shimmering in the far distance. Seated in the room were about half a dozen people, all about Melanie’s age, who broke off a discussion as they entered.

‘What a wonderful room,’ Melanie exclaimed almost involuntarily.

‘Yes, it is my pride and joy,’ the sheik replied. ‘Now, let me introduce you to my friends.’

The men stood up politely to shake hands with Melanie, and their names were all Arabic-sounding to her. There was also one girl, who introduced herself as Michelle, who appeared to be French. After an exchange of pleasantries, the sheik showed

Melanie to her room – a large, air-conditioned suite, albeit facing the parched hillslope to the east.

‘I must leave you now,’ he said. ‘Make yourself at home. And then why not join the others in the lounge?’

Melanie fell in easily with her new-found friends, and there followed carefree days of hedonism, for money seemed to be no object. It might be an outing to the sea, bathing, windsurfing, jetskiing, or a journey to savour the delights of Beirut; a day sightseeing the tourist spots of Israel, or visiting archaeological sites in Jordan. The sheik himself was rarely present, often away on business, but he apparently allowed them free use of his house, vehicles and money; not quite free use of his money, for he insisted on receipts for all their expenses.

Melanie found it stimulating to be with such company, for they spent much time discussing, talking, arguing – arguing about anything and everything, although the talk often tended towards an analysis of the injustices of oppressed people, people who had not the political autonomy that they were due.

Over the summer, she and Michelle became great friends, not only because they were the only girls in the group, but because they genuinely got on well with each other. They became inseparable, and taught each other to speak passably in their native tongues, Gaelic for Michelle, and the Basque language for Melanie.

And they talked about men, of course, particularly the merits and demerits of those in their group.

‘I think the sheik is by far and away the best-looking,’ said Michelle, with a gleam in her eye.

‘I agree,’ responded Melanie.

On a cold grey winter’s day in Cambridge the January following, but with a fire burning in the hearth, Melanie was sitting at her desk poring over an essay. She was surprised by a quiet knock at the door.

‘Come in.’

‘Greetings, my dear.’

Melanie stood-up and her mouth fell open, stuttering, ‘What on earth... I never knew... How come...’, and then she impulsively went over and kissed him on the cheek.

‘I know it is a surprise, my dear, but I just happened to be in Cambridge on business.’ He looked around the room, before adding, ‘You have a nice lodgings here, cosy for an English winter. But I must not stay now and talk, for I merely called to ask if you would like to join me for dinner tonight at the Royal Hotel?’

Melanie flushed pink, and replied, ‘The Royal? I would love to.’

‘Then I will see you there at eight thirty, in the lounge. Goodbye.’ And without further ado, he left.

Melanie could not settle down to anything for the rest of that afternoon, and certainly no more of her essay was written.

‘You look charming, my dear,’ said Sheik Abraham Mudallah as he rose from his chair to greet her, taking both her hands.

‘Thank you,’ replied Melanie, blushing. There were just the two of them at their table for dinner, Melanie being somewhat surprised that the Sheik had not also invited his nephew; apparently he had not even appraised Abdul of his presence in Cambridge.

The upshot of the Sheik’s visit, in the end lasting three days, was that Melanie agreed to join him during the spring vacation for two weeks skiing in Gstaad.

‘Do not worry about the cost,’ he had grandly said, ‘I will arrange it all,’ to which, perhaps to her own surprise, Melanie MacDonald agreed.

She was at home ten days before she let fall to her mother, ‘I’m away to Switzerland next week, skiing.’

‘Skiing? You?’

‘Yes.’

‘Switzerland?’

Melanie nodded. ‘But how can you afford it?’ continued her mother, ‘I mean, the cost?’

‘Don’t worry, mum,’ she replied untruthfully, ‘I have a weekend job and I’ve been saving. A group of us have decided to go skiing, that’s all.’

‘That’s all? What kind of job? You’ve never mentioned it to me before. You should be studying.’

‘I am, I am. The pay is much better in Cambridge than Skye, so I don’t have to work too long to earn a good wage.’

‘And what is the job? Cleaning?’

‘No, mum. I teach English to foreign students. They like my accent, the other teachers, that is, I doubt the students notice.’

‘Well, they should, it’s a good accent. Teaching? That doesn’t sound too bad, but are you sure it doesn’t take up too much of your time?’

‘No, mum, don’t worry.’

‘And clothes, for Switzerland, what will you wear? And skis – you haven’t got any!’

‘We can hire equipment out there, and as for clothes, I’m not sure yet. Would you like to come to Inverness and help me choose?’

Melanie was whisked away from Geneva Airport by the sheik in a white Mercedes, and during the journey to Gstaad, Abraham gave her his full attention, introducing her to Switzerland and its people. ‘A very civilised country. But, against common opinion, very heterogeneous – four different language groups – and yet there is no friction between them unlike, alas, our Middle East.’

‘Why is that?’

‘They all have equal rights, and they are all rich – which helps: they prefer to make money than squabble. We prefer to squabble! Perhaps economic prosperity for all has dulled their imagination, and they have not now the imagination to fight over ideas.’

‘Do you think you should fight for ideas?’

‘Of course, my dear. There is still much inequality in the world, and unfairness, and we must fight on behalf of those whom governments treat unfairly. But enough of this talk! Let me tell you of the arrangements I have made to teach you the art of skiing. I have hired the best instructor in Gstaad to give you his personal attention for the first week. After that, maybe you will be good enough to ski with me?’

‘I hope so, that sounds great. Will it be just us two in the chalet?’

‘For the first week, yes. In the second week you will be pleased to hear that Michelle will be joining us, and two of the other young men you befriended in my house last summer.’ Melanie was not so sure she was pleased to hear this.

‘Oh yes, there is one other thing I have arranged for the two of us,’ he continued. ‘I have booked seats for the opera at Berne on Friday.’

‘Great! Which opera?’

‘Tristan and Isolde.’

At the end of the first week Melanie was pleased with herself and felt she could ski down the steepest pistes with the best of them. She was particularly pleased to note that, after Michelle and the others arrived, the sheik had admiringly said, ‘you have come on well, my dear. I think you ski best of all.’

It was half way through the second week that Abraham first broached to Melanie the idea of her joining him permanently.

‘What, give up my studies, you mean?’

‘Yes, just that. We could always hire a tutor if there is any particular line of inquiry you would like to pursue.’

The suggestion totally unsettled her for a day or two, and she could not discuss it with anyone: her mother definitely not, and neither did she want to raise it with Michelle.

However, while supping *gluhwein* one late afternoon after a day’s skiing under a cloudless sky, surrounded by the mountains of the great alpine chain rising to the heights of the Wildhorn in the far

distance, the sun still warming their faces and still brightening the mountain slopes, Melanie impulsively took his hand. ‘Yes, I’ll come.’

After a brief sojourn at the sheik’s house in Lebanon, he asked Melanie if she would like to join him on a business trip to Palestine – ‘You’ll be all alone here if you stay behind,’ he had said, and she joined him willingly.

Melanie was nervous when they parked in an untidy street, and walked down a narrow, dirty alley. A man with a sub-machine gun on his back leapt out of a doorway and confronted them, but he let them pass after a whispered word from the sheik. The sheik appeared to know where he was going as they twisted and turned amongst closely-packed mud huts until they came to a green door. Without knocking, he pushed the door open and went in.

Seated around a metal table, the paint peeling off, were about half a dozen men, bearded, turbaned, and wearing open-necked military fatigues.

‘Why, hello Melanie!’ said a familiar voice.

‘Hello,’ she replied, being unsure who she was talking to, swiftly followed by ‘Oh, hello,’ as she recognised him as another of the young men staying with her at the sheik’s house last summer.

After a further exchange of introductions, the men began a long conversation in Arabic, of which Melanie understood not a word. Eventually, they all stood up and embraced the sheik. ‘Come on my dear, time to go now,’ and taking her by the hand, he led her back to the car. The man with the gun was now sitting on the bonnet, dangling his legs carelessly. On seeing them both, he got down, cheerily waved goodbye and disappeared up the alleyway.

As soon as they were in the car, Melanie challenged him. ‘Well, what was that all about?’

‘Business.’

‘I’ve never liked to ask you, but what is your business exactly?’

‘I am surprised you have not asked before, but I deal in information. I help people.’

‘What kind of people? And what kind of information?’

‘Ah, I help people to help themselves. People who have been downtrodden over the years by authorities, by governments, I give them the will to help themselves.’

‘And they pay? How can they afford to pay?’

‘I am not the only one. There are many people in the world with money who are willing to pay for a good cause. And now, my dear, I was rude to you this morning, talking in Arabic, so for the rest of the day I propose to give you my full attention.’

A month later, Abraham and Melanie were in Bilbao, visiting Michelle, or rather it was Michelle who visited them at their hotel. The sheik entertained them both extravagantly, and Michelle was particularly fond of coming in to use the swimming pool. On the few days when the sheik was away on business, Michelle showed Melanie around the sights of Bilbao.

‘Everyone is very excited in the city at present,’ Michelle informed her, ‘the prime minister is coming next week. He will officially be opening the new museum of Basque cultural history. It has, of course been open a month already. Let me take you to see it.’

‘I’d like that, let’s go!’

Being built of glass and natural stone, the new museum tastefully combined the old and the new and was proving popular, being crowded even before its opening.

The sheik and Melanie called in at Rome on their way home. While sightseeing at the Circus Maximus, a newspaper on a stall caught her eye. She was horrified to see a picture of Michelle staring at her, next to a picture of a bomb-shattered building. She instinctively grabbed the sheik’s arm, and drew the newspaper to his attention.

‘Look, Abraham, what’s this?’

‘It look likes Michelle.’

‘She’s been killed.’

‘No, I don’t think so.’ He bought the paper from the stallholder and glanced at it quickly. ‘No, she’s alive.’

‘Then why the picture? Oh, my God, no. She can’t have!’

‘Can’t have done what?’

‘Set off the bomb?... You don’t seem surprised?’ She pulled away from him, while he opened up the middle pages of the paper.

‘Look Melanie, there’s more inside. There’s even a picture of you, you and Michelle in the museum, it must have been taken on a security camera.’

Melanie stared at him long and hard, perhaps looking at him properly for the first time. Without another word, she turned from him and ran into the crowd. When she was sure that he was not following, she stopped, felt for her passport and purse, and, finding them, flagged down a taxi. ‘To the airport, please.’

RETURN TO WINDY STANDARD

1.

And it must have been over Ascension that the idea had first come to you: the one day you had free after the conference in Gland, the day in which you had planned a quick climb up the Weisshorn, this could be put off. In any event, you had never been so keen on climbing since your father's death; perhaps it was more the thought of your mother that held you back. She had been with him at the time. It sounded almost farcical now, and so unnecessary, the block of ice falling on his head, narrowly missing her, and she having to swim the pitch cold waters of Lago Argentino. The canoe had disintegrated. And the irony was that it was the ice and snow that had brought him to Chile in the first place. He was one of the first to 'discover' Cerro Torre and the Paine. And he had never left. The dark, long-haired woman he had met in Puerto Natales, the woman with which he was to share so much, she had ensured that. However, there had remained part of him that had never fully left his homeland.

You could picture him now, talking about what he called 'the hills', and you could remember him explaining that there was more than mere height in defining the quality of a mountain. His 'hills' were almost mystic in their quality. You, and you believed your mother as well, had never quite understood: to you mountains were mountains, a sandwich of trees, rock and ice: and the more rock and ice there was the more majestic they were. It was true that at times you felt that they held a force or personality of their own – but a disinterested force, as if they cared neither one way or another about the fate of the humans on their side.

But your father's hills, he would have you think that man had created them personally, and that they became lonely without him: that they had imbibed the millennia of habitation at their feet. In

return, they comforted you, reassured you in their solidity, without overpowering in their size: they might at times fight against you, but after the storm had passed would be sorry, contrite, almost aghast at what they had done, and make it up with a shaft of light, staggering in its intensity and beauty.

Now, you had suddenly realised, here was a chance to see for yourself. These ‘hills’ of your father needed investigation. The European Alps could wait a little longer. Although your father had often raved about the Weisshorn, it was probably similar in many ways to your own mountains.

How could this be fitted in? A flight to London, a dash north, a flight back to Geneva – but all in a day? The Park Service did not pay well, maybe it would all cost too much? No more could be decided now, and you turned back to your reading: a depressing story about the decline of dolphins in the muddy waters of the River Plate, a river you had looked down on, orange-brown, as you left B.A.. You were surprised that any dolphins could survive there at all. But you could not concentrate and your thoughts kept drifting towards the north. A strange contrast, because for many years your thoughts had strayed southwards, filled with longing for O’Higgins Land and a passion for ‘los pinguinos’.

And you drifted off to sleep, trying to remember the name of your father’s father’s farm, and the hill behind. It was this hill in particular, that you held in your mind: ‘Aye, there’s a hill behind; no a high hill, but grand hill for all that. And there’s the De’il’s Putting Stane, strange-like, all on its own.’

2.

You saw her name tag, ‘Marietta D’Alforno’, she was sitting in the seat next to you, and her almost Spanish-sounding name

immediately drew her to you. You fell to talking. She was Swiss, though, but strangely enough knew your father's homeland well: she was even planning a visit there after the conference – to Findhorn, a place that, she said, drew her back again and again.

And so it was that, together, during one long session on 'Administrative Frameworks for Protected Zones in Relation to Democratic Input', or some such, you agreed your plans and later booked your flights. Although she did the arranging, she was fatalistic in her general outlook: once in Glasgow a way would surely open up to your father's father's farm.

3.

She was right, of course. To you it almost passed like a dream: she hired a car (money seemed of little concern to her), and when you struggled and said you thought your father was brought up near 'Carsfin', she said 'yes, yes, I know a Carsphairn, I pass it on the way to Laurieston.' And before you could demur, you were being driven south, and were studying a map of the Ordnance Survey, looking for any name that would jog your memory: you found Carsphairn all right, your father had talked of great sheep sales there, and had made them seem even bigger than those of Punta Arenas and Tierra del Fuego!

And then one name leapt out at you – 'The Devil's Putting Stone' – and your eye drifted along to the summit: 'Marietta, Marietta I have it, the name, the hill's name is Windy Standard.' Nearby you saw the name of what must be your father's father's farm. Only now did you relax somewhat and, looking around, begin to assimilate a new landscape.

And what you saw amazed you: in Patna you saw great blocks of grey houses placed on the hillside, more depressing than anything you had seen even in the shanty towns of Santiago or Buenos Aires

– what dull imagination had conceived them? And further on were black gashes on the hillside where coal was being hauled out of the ground. And you began to get an inkling that this would be no homecoming. And you remembered the surprise with which you had heard the day before that this country had no National Parks: did the people have no pride? And your thoughts, for the first time since your departure, turned to your own home, your own National Park.

Finding your father's father's farm proved easy: at first you thrilled at seeing the neat, bright-white painted house in the distance, albeit through dark and gloomy trees. Arriving, though, the house proved sterile: round and about, you saw none of the every day clutter of a living house, and through the windows the rooms looked too neat to be true. Marietta said that there were many houses like this now in Europe; she said many of the people had left the land and their houses became holiday cabins.

The climb began gently, up a recent track hacked out of the hill, and on each side were great tears in the ground, like flesh mauled by giant claws: not only here, you saw, but on all the hills around; and on other hills, like a crude attempt to bandage the wounds and hide the scars, were dense green stands of uniform blocks of trees. These were not the mystic hills of your father: these hills had been rejected, brutally assaulted even. And you pictured the one man on his bulldozer, in one day single-handedly destroying more land than his forefathers had created in generations. As if echoing your thoughts, Marietta, spoke quietly 'whoever did this had no feel for the land, and was blind of his wounds to the earth. Power, power to destroy, he had too much power.'

The summit was no different: a derelict weather station with a rusty fence and a concrete block house, and some plough lines made just for fun. Coming down the hill, you became angry, and this anger later strengthened into firm resolve: a resolve not to allow unfeeling

hands destroy your own country – and certainly there were plenty. They had already begun, for destruction of the nothofagus forests was underway, and the Araucanian pine was now severely threatened. With these thoughts you quickened your pace down the hill. And you were glad that your father had never come back, that he had not returned to Windy Standard.

Author's Note: Since this story was written a windfarm has been constructed on Windy Standard.

A WALK

And the black rain was still falling as you left, streaming through your hair and bringing grit into your eyes so that you could not see clearly where you were going; and as you walked you remembered how you used to enjoy the rain, the feel of it on your face, and the smell, you could never quite explain, that it brought from the ground after a long dry spell; and then as it slowly cleared, from a view of the distant hills you knew you must be by the wood, and you pictured how you would go into the trees and hear the leaves rustling in the air and the rooks calling on their way home and you would admire the curve on the trunk of an ancient tree; and you would be pleased to find the traveller's joy, to recognise the eunymous and the wayfaring trees, and you might be confused as to whether you had just heard a warbler or a pipit, a yaffle or a jay; but you could not find these things although you knew they were once there; and you travelled on, onto the moors where you would smell the bracken and tread warily through the rushes and leave footprints in the moss; and you were longing to tread the heather and hear the whaup of the curlew above the whins, remembering that each year their sound in the spring, heard for the first time in the long light of evening, would renew your spirit for the coming year, and the thought of the sound made you to travel to the world's end and experience all its variety, 'Come forth, the sky is wide...', and then you remembered that you would never hear the curlew again, indeed that the curlew did not now exist to be heard, and it was more than you could bear; and you walked across the blackened ground, laughing at how angry you used he sight of the swaling, and over the moss that even the black rain had failed to wet, and you walked towards the hills, and you pictured the open land with grass beneath your feet and a wind blowing in your face, you pictured the views down into the valley with stone walls converging onto an old farmhouse, and a copse nearby with a stream winding hopefully into the distance; and it was all still there, yet changed and dead; and you

went down to the stream to look in and peer at its own self-important world as you used to, to watch the caddis fly and the limpets, the stonefly and the leeches, and mayfly and the hog louse, but the stream was dry and all you saw was the dried-up shells of the freshwater shrimps: and then you felt a terrible weight upon you and a terrible responsibility and you cried, and you realised that your tears were too late; earlier you had had romantic tears at many follies, but now they were real; and you sat down and looked at the sky, dark at all times because of the dust, and the sun blood-red yet still high, and you lay down and you shut your eyes and you felt ill.

HENDERSON

He first came aboard at Oban. The windlass had been started and a member of the deck crew was already peering over the bow watching for the anchor to be lifted when the command ‘Stop operations!’ was sent forward. On the bridge Captain Erikson, together with First Officer Anders, were staring through their glasses at the launch speedily heading towards them. There appeared to be three men on board – one at the wheel and two in uniform holding their caps down against the wind.

‘Look,’ commented the captain, ‘one of them is waving at us. There has been no notification of this, has there, Anders?’

‘No. Once we had cleared customs, the officials said we could leave anytime.’

‘I thought so. Well, we had better see what they want. Arrange for the starboard gangway to be lowered.’

‘Very well, sir.’

And that was it! A few minutes later Henderson was on the bridge, announcing to the captain, ‘spot-checks, sir. The Department of Transport has a new policy of spot-checking passenger vessels travelling in British waters, to see that you comply with current regulations, et cetera. It is for the passengers sake, of course, in the interests of their safety, but I am sure a ship such as yours will find it no imposition.’

‘Imposition?’ queried the captain.

‘Yes, I will be with you three days.’

‘Three days?’

‘Yes. I need to see how you operate, how you land passengers, and so on. Then I can make a full report.’

‘Have we a spare cabin, for, I beg your pardon...’

‘Henderson.’

‘For Henderson, Anders?’

‘I’ll check.’

Danby, the hotel manager, opened the door of the cabin. 'Here it is sir, top of the range. The only spare one available. The bedroom is through there, and bathroom through that door. This one has a bath and a shower. Now, can I get your luggage sir?'

'I don't have any.'

'Why, not even a toothbrush?'

'Oh yes, I have that. I always carry one around with me. But there's no point carrying more than you need to, is there?'

'No other clothes?'

'No, my uniform will suffice.'

'Not really sir. I will see what I can dig up for you.'

'Thank you. Now I must go and inspect the ship.'

Henderson walked back along the corridor and up the steps to the bridge.

'Ah, there you are,' said the captain as he entered.

'Yes, here I am. I now want to inspect the ship?'

'Now? The whole ship?'

'Yes.'

'Do you want to see anything in particular?'

'No, at this stage I just want to see the layout. Who is your safety officer?'

'Second Officer Macpherson.'

'He had better come too, to make notes.'

So it was that Henderson led Captain Erikson and Second Officer Macpherson, accompanied also by the bosun, on a tour round the ship. Henderson opened cupboards and hatches, looked at fire extinguishers and hosepipes, read fire safety information, checked doors and bulkheads, prodded lifeboats and studied closely the 'best before' dates on the liferafts. He went into the engine room, and when he had to ask to be given ear protectors, he made a little note in his notebook. He went into the galley, and for a long time Henderson stood and watched the chef at work. He then took a sample of meat from a sideboard, asked for a polythene bag, and placed the sample in it.

‘For testing,’ was all they could get out of him.

Thereafter Henderson went up to the lounge to hear, Fergus, the cruise director brief the passengers on the ship’s itinerary for the next few days.

‘We will be at sea all morning,’ Fergus was saying, ‘cruising up the Sound of Mull, and then round the Point of Ardnamurchan – the westernmost point of mainland Britain. Shortly after lunch we will anchor off Rum, and go ashore to Kinloch Castle – you will love this, a real Victorian extravaganza. There will be guides to show us round.

‘On return to the ship, we set sail for the Outer Hebrides, arriving at the Island of Barra early in the evening. There we will anchor for the night and next morning visit Kisimul Castle on its tiny island, followed by a bus tour of Barra and Vatersay. You will have the afternoon free to explore the main settlement of Castlebay.

‘At first light on Monday, we set sail westwards to the remote archipelago of St Kilda – “Islands on the Edge of the World” as they are called. We will make every effort to land, and this will be the highlight of the voyage. To prepare you for this, Dr Archibald, our resident expert, will be giving a lecture on the history and wildlife of St Kilda tomorrow evening after dinner.

‘We hope to spend most of Monday exploring St Kilda, continuing northwards in the late afternoon to the Flannan Isles where an evening landing is planned...’

‘Any questions?’, asked Fergus when he had finished. Before any passenger could respond, to Fergus’ surprise, Henderson spoke up and introduced himself to the assembled company.

‘My name is Henderson, and I am from the Board of Trade. I will be accompanying you for a few days, and I am here to ensure that this ship complies with the regulations.’

‘Why, do you feel that the ship is unsafe? Have you heard bad reports?’ queried a voice from the floor.

‘No, no, not at all. This is merely routine, to ensure the ship can continue to maintain a passenger licence for cruising in British

waters. There is nothing to worry about. Captain Erikson appears to have everything in hand. I hope you have a pleasant voyage, and don't mind me.'

As the passengers were disembarking into Zodiacs for the short journey across Kinloch Bay to Kinloch Castle, Henderson was leaning on the handrail, watching operations. There was a choppy sea from the east, and crew were present to help the passengers off the platform into the agitated dinghies. A short, elderly lady came up to Henderson to stand beside him.

'I am not going ashore,' she stated, and Henderson noted the American accent, 'it looks a bit rough. In any case, the ship is so comfortable, why leave it? I've seen castles before.'

'You mean you would be happy if the ship didn't go to sea at all, spending all the time in port?'

'No, it's fun to travel.'

'But doesn't the sea look the same everywhere, as well as castles? And don't all islands look the same, at least from a distance?'

'Probably. Anyhow, why not join me for a drink? Or are you going ashore?'

'I must watch the landing operations for a while, and then maybe I will be down. What cabin?'

'101. Be seeing you.' And she was gone.

Henderson did join her shortly after, knocking gently at her door.

'Come in.' He noted that a bottle of Jack Daniels was already on the table, with two glasses waiting. She poured out two stiff measures, and handed one to him.

They drank in silence for a while, Henderson noting the opulence of her belongings, including what looked like an expensive fur coat, a gold biro and a small ornate chest. He languidly picked up a gold-framed photograph of an elderly gentleman.

‘My late husband,’ Mrs Ricketts announced, ‘he only died a couple of months ago.’

‘Oh, I am sorry to hear that.’

‘Don’t be. He wasn’t very nice. And he hated boats!’

‘Did he now. Well, I like them.’

‘So I would have thought.’

Half an hour later Henderson was walking down the gangway, and onto the embarkation platform. The crew on duty eyed him warily. Landing operations had now finished, and there was an empty Zodiac moored alongside the platform, its engine idling gently and its driver sitting on the pontoon.

‘Ah,’ said Henderson, ‘Adams, isn’t it?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Well, Adams, I would like to test these boats, would you mind if I had a drive?’

‘No, go ahead.’

He clambered in, shouted to the crew to let go, and took the tiller. He turned the throttle on full, and the boat sped off, its forty horsepower galloping. Unfortunately, Henderson failed to keep pace, and disappeared over the stern. As the Zodiac began to circle round, Adams regained the tiller, throttled it down, and brought up beside Henderson. He hauled him over the side, and a bedraggled Henderson slowly stood up.

‘No lifejacket, I see sir,’ commented Adams dryly.

‘Thank you,’ replied Henderson. ‘I now have a feeling for these boats. Do they need to be so powerful?’

‘Useful with a full load in a gale.’

‘Do you take passengers out in a gale?’

‘Not willingly. Sometimes there is no choice.’

‘Well I must go and get changed. Thank you again.’

Arriving back at his cabin, Henderson found a set of clothes laid out, seaman’s trousers, a check shirt, and a thick jersey. And he wore these the rest of his time aboard ship – he was not seen in uniform again.

On the bridge, Captain Erikson and Anders, who had watched it all from the wing, were discussing the incident.

‘It is not the first time I have seen that happen,’ Anders was saying.

‘No,’ responded the captain, ‘it’s quite common, especially if you forget the power of the engine.’

‘But you would have thought that Henderson...’ He tailed off.

‘Yes, you would.’

At this moment Adams came in. ‘What do you make of it, Adams?’ asked the captain.

‘I don’t know. And no lifejacket. There appears to be one rule for them, and one for us.’

‘Hmm.’

Henderson seemed unperturbed by the incident, laughing it off, saying he was human, and everyone made mistakes. Thereafter, and maybe it had something to do also with him being out of uniform, Henderson appeared more approachable.

For the voyage across to Barra, with the wind behind them, it was an easy passage, with many people ambulating on deck prior to dinner. Henderson was again leaning against the rail, talking to a passenger when Mrs Ricketts approached him.

‘Hallo, Mr Henderson,’ she hailed. ‘May I introduce my new-found friend, Molly Kirkpatrick.’

‘How do you do, Mrs Kirkpatrick.’

‘Miss,’ she replied.

‘I am so sorry, Miss Kirkpatrick. Delighted to meet you.’

‘Amanda has been telling me about your little swim,’ said Miss Kirkpatrick. ‘She says she saw it all, although unfortunately most of us, me included, were ashore...’

‘Unfortunately?’ he chuckled.

‘Well, no. But I would like to have seen it!’

‘Are you happy with their safety precautions?’ put in Mrs Ricketts.

‘They could be improved!’

‘Anyway, Molly and I are here to ask you for dinner.’

‘Even wearing this jersey? Thank you, I accept.’

‘Hey, what’s that bird flying past?’ asked Molly.

Henderson followed her gaze for a while, before answering that it was a petrel. They all watched in awe as it closed its wings, plummeted headfirst into the sea, and came up shortly after with a fish in its mouth.

‘He’s enthusiastic for his food!’ commented Molly. ‘I hope, though, that you are more restrained than him, Henderson, at dinner. We will see you at our table.’

It was a fine morning at Barra, bright sunshine with a fresh wind still blowing. Henderson turned down the offer of visiting the castle with Amanda and Molly, and also turned down the bus tour of Barra. ‘I can’t stand buses,’ he told them, ‘and I also have important business to do on board ship today.’ However, Mrs Ricketts later swore that, as they were returning to the ship mid afternoon, she had seen Henderson knock at a door of a building in Castlebay, and be let in.

It was not looking good the next day for a landing on St Kilda, with the continuing easterly wind bringing the waves right into Village Bay. Fergus took a small boatload of crew into the jetty to assess the possibility of landing.

‘I don’t think we can land,’ shouted Fergus into the boat. ‘At least, some of us may be able to, but there is no way we can land passengers. I am prepared to try to land some of us for a short while – to show Henderson what we can do! Anyone want to try it? You will only be ashore a few minutes, as the waves could yet pick up. Anyone want to have a shot?’

Adams and Henderson volunteered, and it was with consummate seamanship that Fergus, judging the waves, managed to edge the

bow of the boat to the edge of the jetty, enabling the two of them to jump ashore. There were a couple of military personnel from the island's radar tracking station watching the proceedings, and they greeted Adams and Henderson warmly.

'Ah, there you are, Henderson,' said the officer, 'good to meet you. Would you and your colleague care for a coffee?'

Adams radioed Fergus, who said he would be back in twenty minutes, no more. They walked the short distance to the buildings, and were warmly welcomed by the staff. Adams spent the time talking to the island's warden over a cup of coffee, while Henderson disappeared into a back room with the officer.

Twenty five minutes later they were both back on board, arriving just as the anchor was being lifted. Captain Erikson and Fergus had agreed that the ship would spend the morning cruising the archipelago, but that they would investigate again the possibility of a landing at midday.

As it turned out, no landing was possible, even though the wind was moderating.

'Ho, hum!' exclaimed Fergus. 'What do you think, captain? What time do you expect us to arrive at the Flannan Islands?'

'Let's see. It's about seventy miles, say six hours.'

'Right. That should get us there in time for a landing before dinner. If we can land, it will make up to some extent for not getting ashore at St Kilda. I'll make an announcement over the PA to that effect.'

They reached the Flannans about six thirty – bleak, windswept, uninhabited islands in the middle of the ocean, twenty miles from the Long Island, the nearest land. Reconnaissance by Fergus and Adam indicated that a landing was feasible, at least for the more energetic, and this was effected with an ease that belied its difficulty. Henderson observed the proceedings with satisfaction.

Those who ventured ashore were surprised to find a well-made path to the summit of the island, where stood the lighthouse and its

surrounding buildings, a relatively modern contrast to the only other building: a small stone-age cell, most likely the abode of some long-forgotten early-Christian hermit, or perhaps even a more recent, albeit ancient, cleit. There was not much else to see, passengers were heading back to the jetty within half an hour, thinking of cocktails and dinner.

Molly and Amanda had kept a place at their table for Henderson, but, come the fish course, there was no sign of him. There was still no sign of him come the dessert, so as soon as was reasonable, Mrs Ricketts left the dining room and ventured into the officer's mess, inquiring after him.

'No,' said Anders, 'I have not seen him. Come to think of it, I have not seen him for a long time.'

In fact, no-one had seen him since the Flannan Isles, and, after an exhaustive search, they could only conclude that he was not on board. It emerged that, seeing himself as an officer, he had not been using the signing off/on system that the passengers had to use to when going ashore, so there was no way of confirming he had returned to the ship, although many had witnessed seeing him on the island.

There was no alternative for Captain Erikson but to turn the ship around. On arrival, although dusk was falling, a search party was sent ashore.

Henderson was never seen again, neither was there any sign of him even though a major search and rescue operation was launched at first light in what had now become calm seas. The captain had radioed the Department of Trade as soon as he was missing, but no-one there had ever heard of him.

The museum in Oban has recently acquired a toothbrush and uniform and put them in a glass case – the only extant evidence.

A SHORT LIFE

‘Skiff,’ called out Amanda from the bottom bunk.

‘Thank you,’ called down Harrison. ‘That gives us, now, five letters, beginning with “F” to concentrate on... I’ve got it, “Focus”.’

‘How about four letters, beginning with “F”?’ she whispered quietly.

‘What’s that?’

‘Oh nothing.’

‘Did I hear what I thought I heard?’ Harrison sat up, banged his head against the ceiling, swore, swung his feet over the edge, and dropped to floor. He sat down on Amanda’s bunk and, feeling her warm hand come to rest on his, he tentatively lay down beside her.

The train powered on through the night.

There was a smile on his face as Harrison pushed open the gate.

‘Amanda, I’m home.’

He looked around, admiring their sunlit herbaceous border, from which it was Amanda’s pride and joy to fill their cottage with cut-flowers. On a bench below the sunflower, wearing a dress that matched the colours of the garden, he saw her, sitting with her face in her hands.

He sat down, putting his arms around her. ‘I can’t,’ she sobbed, ‘I never will be able to. You should reject me utterly. All our plans...’

‘Don’t worry,’ he soothed, adding eventually, ‘there is always adoption.’

She picked up the bottle, calling out, ‘I hereby name her *Sunflower*.’ As their life-savings slid into the water, Amanda cut the ribbon and crashed the champagne against the bow of the yacht.

‘Ow!’ she screamed, as blood flowed from her hand, ‘it’s the bottle, it’s the bloody bottle, it’s cut me!’

Harrison rushed to her side and, pulling out his handkerchief, wrapped it tightly round her hand.

‘It’s an omen,’ she cried, ‘I was never meant to reject everything and go to sea with you in this ruddy boat,’ and, pulling away from Harrison, she ran into the crowd.

As Harrison held the tiller firm, the focus of his imagination was not the mountainous sea, wave crowding in upon wave, nor did his thoughts rest upon Amanda, his wife, trapped in her bunk and unhappy about all they had given up – house, career, friends. No, the smile on his face was from the sheer joy of the present, and its contrast with his first ever boating, a small skiff on the backwaters of the Cam. The smile froze as some instinct made him turn round and see the crest of the towering wave begin its descent, downwards, downwards...